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*Assessment of Communist Capabilities and
Near Term Intentions in South Vietnam in
The Light of North Vietnam's Actions
Since the Ceasefire*

DIA Review Completed.

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
1 March 1973

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNIST CAPABILITIES AND NEAR
TERM INTENTIONS IN SOUTH VIETNAM IN THE LIGHT OF
NORTH VIETNAM'S ACTIONS SINCE THE CEASEFIRE*

Summary

1. The North Vietnamese, as we have previously reported, have continued to move large quantities of military equipment and supplies into Laos and South Vietnam since the ceasefire went into effect on 28 January. There is also firm evidence that North Vietnamese troops have continued to move south toward and into South Vietnam since the ceasefire.

2. Much of this new equipment and fresh manpower--especially that portion of it going to MR 3 and MR 4--will begin to arrive in South Vietnam within the next few weeks. When it does arrive, it will significantly bolster Communist troop strength and firepower, and will at least partially offset the heavy losses which Communist forces suffered in the months before the ceasefire.

3. At a minimum, the North Vietnamese have clearly decided to engage in a major refitting and strengthening of their depleted main force units in the initial post-ceasefire period--and they have clearly been willing to commit major violations of the settlement agreement in order to accomplish this.

4. Beyond this, however, it is also possible that the rebuilding process indicates a Communist intention to resume major military operations with main forces in the near future. At the present rate of buildup, Communist forces in most areas of South

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[redacted]

Vietnam could be ready for selective major actions in mid- or late spring, though they could not undertake nationwide operations like those in the early months of the 1972 Communist offensive until around the end of this year.

5. Our best evidence is that the Communists at present are intent on maintaining both their military and political options in the south. In the weeks immediately to come, and particularly until all U.S. forces leave South Vietnam, Hanoi apparently will concentrate on the political struggle with Saigon--on such things as recruiting, grass-roots organization, terrorism and subversion, as well as negotiating with the Saigon government. Enemy main force units will play a secondary role during this period, primarily defending areas already held by the Communists.

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6. At the same time, [redacted] the Communists are pessimistic about the prospects for any political resolution of the conflict with Saigon, and are telling their cadres that it may at some date be necessary to revert to large-scale military action.

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7. The North Vietnamese leaders themselves probably have not made a final decision for or against major offensive operations in 1973. Their decision, when it comes, will be influenced by the progress of their political negotiations with Saigon, the status of their grass-roots competition with the GVN in contested areas, and the attitudes of their allies in Peking and Moscow. Most importantly, their decision will be influenced by their judgment of how far they can push the United States--i.e., whether they can initiate major military operations without running an unacceptable risk of a very strong and harsh U.S. reaction.

* * *

The Details

8. The facts of Communist logistics and manpower activities since the ceasefire have been treated separately and need not be repeated here.* The effect of these activities is to increase significantly the capabilities of Communist armed forces in South Vietnam, as indicated below.

Communist Capabilities in Each GVN Military Region

✓ 9. In northern MR 1, the Communists have maintained a large combat force which consists of six infantry divisions and a number of independent infantry, artillery, and armor units. The CIA believes that the North Vietnamese have already made up most of the losses in equipment and manpower suffered by these units in last year's heavy fighting. The DIA believes that many of the Communist units in this area are still understrength in both manpower and armor. ✓ Currently, enemy forces in northern Quang Tri Province are capable of initiating multi-regimental attacks of a limited duration in the vicinity of Quang Tri City on short notice. Near Hue, the 324B NVA Division and the MRTTH regiments are capable of harassing RVNAF positions southwest of the city and carrying out attacks-by-fire and sapper actions against Hue itself. In southern MR 1, the 711th NVA Division can defend its bases in the Que Son Mountains, but it does not currently have the capability to seize significant territory in the coastal lowlands. Farther south, although the 2nd NVA Division is capable of making limited gains against RVNAF local forces, it cannot maintain them against determined RVNAF main force counteroperations.

10. Communist forces in the rest of South Vietnam are not as well off as in northern MR 1. Most units in the southern three fourths of the country suffered extremely heavy equipment and personnel losses during the last year, and these have not been

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fully made up thus far. A substantial upgrading in the capabilities of Communist units in these areas, however, will probably occur in the next two months as heavy equipment and fresh replacements arrive from the north. The fighting near Sa Huynh demonstrates the problems confronting enemy forces in the central part of the country. The Communists were able to seize a narrow strip of territory along the coast near Sa Huynh, apparently with the intention of using the area to bring in supplies by sea. (Aerial photography indicates that they may have succeeded in landing some supplies in that area in early February.) The GVN, however, launched a major drive to retake the village and nearby terrain. The Communists offered stiff resistance for a short time but eventually had to withdraw. Communist prisoners captured in this engagement reported that their units were drastically understrength and unable to hold out against the stronger South Vietnamese forces.

11. In MR 2, enemy units presently in the central highlands appear capable of defending areas north and west of Kontum City and west of Pleiku City. They are also capable of conducting attacks-by-fire, limited ground attacks against RVNAF installations and isolated population centers, as well as sporadic interdiction of Route 14 between Kontum and Pleiku Cities. However, they are not currently capable of seriously threatening either province capital. On the coast, the 3rd NVA Division can defend its base areas in northern Binh Dinh Province, carry out attacks-by-fire and limited ground attacks, and sporadically interdict Routes 1 and 19. It is unlikely, though, that the 3rd Division could take and hold much additional territory.

12. There currently are approximately 10,000 enemy infantry replacements strung out along the infiltration pipeline that are earmarked for the central part of South Vietnam, largely for the MR 2 area. These will not offset the heavy losses the Communists have suffered in this area, but they will enable the enemy to strengthen many units and possibly

bring some back to normal strength. The current pattern of evidence on logistics activity indicates that Communist forces in this sector also will be receiving substantial quantities of tanks and artillery. In some parts of the region, the Communists may enjoy a firepower advantage over local government units--an advantage which could, however, be neutralized fairly quickly in any given location by the mobility and air power of South Vietnamese forces.

13. In MR 3 and MR 4, enemy main forces at present are a fairly limited threat. In MR 3, they are probably capable of defending areas which they now control. In both military regions they could initiate widespread attacks-by-fire and limited ground attacks, and sporadically interdict lines of communication. In some areas they could temporarily seize isolated hamlets, but it is unlikely that they could take or hold any major population centers.

14. These regions of South Vietnam (MRs 3 and 4 plus the border territories of Cambodia) are the very areas, however, to which the bulk of the fresh troops and much of the new equipment now in the infiltration system appear to be headed. Many of the roughly 20,000 North Vietnamese troops now in the pipeline and destined for these areas should begin to arrive in the provinces north and west of Saigon within the next few weeks. These troops will go a long way toward replacing Communist manpower losses in this area, and they should enable the enemy to rebuild many units. At least 100--and perhaps 200 or more--tanks and a large number of artillery weapons, including some long range 130-mm. field guns, should also arrive soon. The amounts of armor and artillery appear to exceed reported Communist losses, and the total firepower of Communist forces will be improved over past levels.

15. The heavy supply shipments throughout the infiltration corridor will allow the Communist forces to replenish and build up sizable stockpiles in secure base areas, and the deployment of engineering units to the central and southern areas of the country should assist in this project. There also are indications that in addition to replenishing their forces

[redacted]

with covertly infiltrated men and supplies, the Communists envisage a wholesale equipment improvement via exchanges openly carried out under the terms of the agreement. The Communist 5th Division has issued instructions to its units to round up all weapons and equipment and prepare to turn them in for new weapons. The instructions indicated that captured weapons were to be included, and also weapons damaged and worn out prior to the ceasefire. Similar reports have surfaced in the northern part of the country, and if the practice is widespread, it would mean that the Communists hope to use the ceasefire agreement to refit their units with new weapons. This would effectively improve the capabilities of many units since many Communist units are forced to use poor weapons.

16. Most of the equipment, supplies, and troops detected to date will arrive in the border areas during the next two months, but in the southern three quarters of the country, it probably will take the Communists another month or so to integrate them fully into their forces. Therefore, at the present rate of buildup, Communist forces in most areas of South Vietnam could be ready for selective major actions in mid- or late spring, though they could not undertake nationwide operations comparable to those at the peak of the 1972 fighting until the end of this year.

North Vietnamese Intentions

17. The evidence we have obtained recently on Communist intentions [redacted]

[redacted] makes it clear that the Communists view the initial period following the cease-fire as a time to place heavy priority on the refitting, retraining, and reorganization of their main forces in South Vietnam.

[redacted] the Communists were seriously concerned with the depleted strength of their forces at the time of the ceasefire and viewed their refurbishment as a matter of greatest urgency. (At that time some enemy units were at less than fifty percent of strength.) [redacted]

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[] the Communists had no intention of allowing their main forces to remain in a status in which they are unable to defend Communist territorial holdings in South Vietnam.

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18. Given this intent, from Hanoi's standpoint it was logical to continue a substantial input of men and supplies into the pipeline to South Vietnam, before and after the ceasefire, both to take advantage of the favorable dry season conditions in the Laotian panhandle, and to complete a substantial rebuilding process before the cease-fire teams moved into place and became operational at border checkpoints. Hanoi may well have concluded that it could get away with such action without causing a breakdown or reversal of the US withdrawal process.

19. At this point it is too early to conclude that the ongoing resupply operation from the North is related to a specific Communist plan to renew major military operations in South Vietnam over the short term. The evidence currently available, however, does strongly suggest that Hanoi intends to keep open and viable its political and its military options in South Vietnam. The Communists apparently plan to begin a process of political struggle and negotiation with Saigon accompanied by low-level and selective use of terrorist tactics, armed intimidation, subversion and guerrilla activities. During this period, enemy main forces are to play mainly a defensive role. [] this message which is being passed to the cadre. They are also being told, however, that the negotiations and political operations may lead to a stalemate on the national level and be unproductive on the local level. Thus, they are to remain prepared at an unspecified time []

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to use military as well as political means in an attempt to force developments in a direction favorable to the Communist side if so ordered. One recent enemy directive, [] put it as follows:

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"The revolution through political struggle must be continued in a spirit of determination and patience, motivating the masses to fight against the enemies to defeat them within the framework of the ceasefire agreement. The transformation of armed struggle into political struggle will be a difficult task, but these difficulties have been anticipated by the central party committee. Although it is now a political struggle by peaceful means, military tactics may be initiated when necessary and cadre and soldiers will have to make sacrifices if the enemy is to be defeated. Therefore, our armed forces will continue to be supplied, reinforced and developed as they were before the ceasefire." (underlining added)

20. The thrust of this message is that, while the Communists intend to keep up and improve their military capability, they have as yet set no firm timeframe, or even taken a firm decision, for or against the renewal of major offensive military operations. When they make their decision, there are a number of considerations that they will wish to take into account before deciding whether to renew major offensive operations. One factor will be the status of the political negotiation process with Saigon. Although the Communists are pessimistic over the prospects for arranging any viable election formula with Saigon, or even for the establishment of a satisfactory "reconciliation" body to oversee such an election, their actions and statements make it clear that they are very much interested in thoroughly probing the prospects for political arrangements with Saigon--a process which surely will take longer than the 90 day timeframe set by the cease-fire agreement. During this process, major overt Communist military action would probably be seen in Hanoi as counterproductive. The Communists will also want to assess thoroughly the status of their grass-roots position in South

Vietnam, especially to see whether they are gaining or losing ground with Saigon in the contested sectors of the countryside. A fair judgment on this aspect of the picture could hardly be made before late spring at the earliest.

21. Another important consideration apart from the situation in the south will involve the attitude of Hanoi's allies in Peking and Moscow toward major Communist renewal of the fighting in the South, and the willingness of these allies to supply the war material necessary to fill Communist losses suffered in any substantial new fighting. At the present time, both Peking and Moscow are publicly stressing the importance of adherence by all parties, including the Communist side, to the spirit of the agreement. The Vietnamese Communists may believe, however, that there is a chance over the next few months that the confrontation between the two sides in South Vietnam will again sharpen to the point that their allies must choose between providing an essential minimum of war aid or appearing to desert the Vietnamese in the face of a tough, united stand by the US and South Vietnam. This, however, must perforce still be in the realm of contingency planning.

22. Hanoi must also consider the possibility that U.S. air and naval support, and increased supplies of war material, would be provided to Saigon in the event the Communists renewed the fighting. Until the prisoner exchanges are carried through with the US and there is a fuller record of Washington's attitude toward the agreement, however, it will be difficult for the North Vietnamese to attempt a judgment on the likelihood and extent of renewed US involvement.

23. Overall, the Hanoi Politburo has probably not yet decided precisely what policy to pursue in South Vietnam. As the facts and evidence recounted above clearly indicate, however, the military option is unquestionably being kept open as a credible and viable one. The pattern of Communist activity to

date shows no hint of any intention to shut down the life support system for Communist forces in South Vietnam that runs through Laos and Cambodia.

24. Hanoi's eventual decision on whether to pursue its ambitions over the longer term future by relying primarily on political struggle or by renewed resort to major military action will perforce be influenced by various factors described above as they evolve in the weeks immediately ahead--chiefly the Lao Dong Party's own private estimate of its chances of success in a primarily political struggle with the GVN (which, at the moment, the southern Party organization seems to regard with considerable pessimism), Hanoi's estimate of the degree of support and backing it can anticipate from Moscow and Peking, and Hanoi's estimate of what the traffic will bear vis-a-vis the U.S. On the latter point, the current brisk pace of logistic resupply activity through Laos, the fact of continued personnel infiltration and other developments--most notably Hanoi's renewed effort to link the rate of U.S. prisoner release to factors specifically separated from the U.S. prisoner release question during the negotiations that led to the 27 January Paris agreement--all indicate that Hanoi will continue to press and probe in order to ascertain just how much discretionary latitude it has in the post-settlement situation and just what are the limits of U.S., GVN (plus, perhaps, Soviet and Chinese) tolerance.